

## Pioneer Clothing



One of the major necessities of life for the pioneers was clothing.

Ready-made, store-bought

clothing was scarce on the frontier. As a result, most of what they wore was what they could make themselves. Moccasins could be made of tanned buckskin and breeches and shirts of dressed skin worked soft and thin by hand. Once cultivated, the flax plant was a good source of raw material for clothing. Wool also was very important in the pioneers' efforts to provide themselves with adequate apparel. The preparation of these materials and the production of home-made clothing was a significant part of the pioneers' lives.

Flax was sown in the spring and a small patch was ample for the needs of the family. In late summer or early autumn, the ripened plant was pulled and left on the ground for a month or more to rot out the woody stalks. During the winter, the men applied the *flax break* to crimp the stalks, and the process of "*scutching*," or scraping away the broken stalks, was completed with the swingling knife. Once the roughage was cleared away, the strikes, bound in bundles, were soaked in water troughs and pounded with pestles until soft and pliable. The women then drew the fibers across the long sharp iron teeth of the hackel or hatchel, and the shorter fibers, or tow, were removed. Many combings, sometimes over different sets of hackles, left a fine long fiber, which on the spinning wheel was twisted into a strong thread. With this thread as warp and the tow spinnings as fillings, the hand loom turned out a coarse cloth called tow linen used for towels, ticking, men's shirts and summer pants, and women's and children's everyday dresses.

Shearing for their wool took place in the spring. The fleece was washed, scoured, hand picked for dirt, straw, and burrs, then carded on *hand cards* to break up the previous arrangement of the fibers, and made into small rolls for spinning. Spinning wheels were a necessary part of every pioneer's household. A small wheel, about twenty inches in diameter and run by a foot pedal, was used for flax. The large, wool-spinning wheels were rotated by hand. The hum of the spinning wheel was an almost continuous sound in the pioneers' households.

Yarn removed from the wheels was wound into knots and skeins (forty threads to the knot, seven knots to the skein). After bleaching or dyeing in the skein, the yarn, if intended for weaving, was wound by hand or wheel upon quills for the shuttles.

Patterns and designs were simple and the cloth was coarse. The looser homespun wool yarns were woven with linen which produced *linsey-woolsey*, a durable, warm cloth much used for women's apparel. Woven with cotton, it produced "jean," used for men's clothing.

Although many yarns and cloths were made up in the natural color, desire for variety led to development of a number of home dyeing practices. Sometimes the raw fiber was

colored, more often the yarn or cloth. Early dyestuff came almost entirely from the woods. Hulls of the black walnut gave a dark brown, those of the white walnut or butternut a dull yellow or tawny shade; sumac berries produced a warm red; hickory bark or smartweed, yellow; peach leaves, green; oak and maple, purple; black oak, chestnut, and other barks, various colors. Combinations of these colors were also possible.

With wool and flax yarns and cloths of various mixtures provided, the task of making clothes could be undertaken.

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